



'Turning up to the party uninvited'. Exploring the experiences of female gamers

Kate Bentham

Supervised by: Dr Robert Lowe

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ABSTRACT

Following on from previous research that has highlighted the difficulties females face whilst playing video games (McLean and Griffiths, 2013), this research aims to explore female gaming experiences, with emphasis placed on societal influences and the visible community.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using five female participants to explore their experiences in the gaming community. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and three themes emerged; perceived weakness, overemphasis on gender and feeling unwelcome in the gaming community.

The findings suggest that sexist stereotypes surrounding video gaming are internalised by females and have a negative effect on their motivation to play and ability to progress to a higher level. Implications of the research include better policing of online environments and the introduction of initiatives, similar to STEM programmes, to encourage females to play video games and welcome them to progress to up a professional level.

KEY WORDS:	FEMALE GAMERS	VIDEO GAMES	SEXISM	GAMING COMMUNITY	SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Introduction

'Girl gamers believe that they experience gaming culture as secondary gamers...as long as the public face of gaming continues to be male dominated, girl gamers will continue to be perceived as residing on the margins of gaming culture.' (Schott and Horrell, 2000: 51)

Traditionally, playing video games has always been seen as a male dominated activity and research has shown that both males and females are equally likely to share this view (Selwyn, 2007). However, with the rising popularity of video game play, more women than ever are joining the gaming community (McLean and Griffiths, 2013) and it has been reported that females aged 18 and above represent the fastest growing gamer demographic in the US (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). However, although research has shown that an equal number of males and females play games (Casti, 2014; Chalk, 2014), gaming still remains a male dominated world in where females are subject to harassment and sexism (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Consalvo, 2012; Fox and Tang, 2014; Salter and Blodgett, 2012; Yee, 2014).

The misconception of females being a minority group most likely stems from previous research that does not account for the rise in female gamers; when compared to females, games are enjoyed more by males, played more frequently by males and played for longer by males (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Phillips, Rolls, Rouse, & Griffiths, 1995). Research of this kind contributes to social constructs of gaming being primarily a male activity (Carr, 2005) and encourages further exploration into the subjective experiences of females in the gaming community. As a result, further research trying to understand

and explain gender differences in video game experience has become more popular in recent years (Griffiths and Lewis, 2011; Griffiths and McLean, 2013).

Researching the experiences of female gamers allows for positive change to take place in the gaming community and industry such as working towards gender equality within gaming environments (Fox and Wang, 2014) and providing an insight into how future games could be more inclusive of females (Dickey, 2006). This is particularly important now as gaming is more popular than ever; the 2014 world final of League of Legends was watched by 27 million people compared to 18 million people watching the 2014 NBA finals (Karakus, 2015). Developers must consider the possible alienating effects their games may be having on females and in consequence, the loss of audience for their games (Maisonave, 2014). Video gaming is no longer a subculture and the representation of women is paramount for reducing the social exclusion of females, promoting equality and diversity and reducing sexist attitudes, particularly around rape culture (Fox and Potocki, 2015; Fox and Tang, 2016).

Motivations for Playing Video Games

When exploring contributing factors that led to the lack of female presence in the gaming scene, a recurring theme is societal factors; simply that females are not socially rewarded in the same way for playing video games as males are (Krahe and Moller, 2004). Krahe and Moller (2004) carried out research on attraction to violent video games using 231 13-14 year olds and found that males are significantly more attracted to violent games than females. In addition, they found that participants who accepted physical aggression as a norm were significantly more attracted to violent video games. When looked at in combination with evidence that males are more aggressive based on social factors (Harris, 1996), it could be argued that females are

significantly less attracted to violent video games due to context and cultural variables that females are exposed to.

Need for inclusion, affection and control are universal reasons as to why video gameplay occurs and motivation for playing tends to be shaped by these social factors (Lucas and Sherry, 2004). Lucas and Sherry (2004) argue that while bound by established social norms, males and females achieve social satisfaction and acceptance by adhering to sex role expectations. They explain that females play video games less than males because video games are perceived to be a male dominated activity (Selwyn, 2007) and based on the motivation for inclusion and affection females do not achieve social acceptance in this respect from playing video games. Lucas and Sherry (2004) claim that females avoid playing competitively because they can find greater social acceptance and reward in other activities. Hartmann and Klimmt (2006) support this claim by arguing that competing and winning are less socially attractive to female gamers as they are to male gamers.

Female Representation in the Gaming Community

Immersion into the game while playing allows for greater enjoyment of the game and motivates many individuals to play video games (Griffiths and McLean, 2013).

Attachment to a character allows for greater immersion while playing a game (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2009) and the ability to personalise a character can encourage greater identification with the character (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer, 2009). So the more able a player is to personalise their character the more they identify with it and so achieve higher enjoyment from the game as it is much easier to immerse into the gaming world. However, females are less likely to immerse into the game as more females than males tend to gender swap; this is to avoid male approaches while

playing the game (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008). If females gender swap, they have less attachment to their character as their character is fundamentally different from themselves and so less immersion and enjoyment whilst playing the game. Linked with avoidance of other's behaviour, this helps explain why females may avert playing online games (Griffiths and McLean, 2013).

Despite research being carried out in an attempt to open the world up to female gamers (Dickey, 2006; Fox and Tang, 2014), it has had little effect and gaming is still considered a 'man's world' (Salter and Blodgett, 2012). It is not a coincidence either, with only 22% of game developers being female (International Game Developers Association, 2014), video games are designed by males, for males (Griffiths, 2007). Ivory (2006) used a content analysis to investigate the depiction of male and female video game characters and found that character representations in video games are generally focused towards male players. Female characters were not accurately represented in numbers or appearance, the few female characters that there was to choose from were oversexualised, especially compared with the male equivalents (Near, 2012). Additionally, when female characters were present they had unrealistic bodies compared to real females (Downs & Smith, 2010; Martins et al., 2009). This affects video game play engagement from female gamers who take their gamer identity seriously, as they were frustrated when they could not play as a female character (Griffiths and McLean, 2013).

Research suggests that sexism, including the sexualisation of female characters in video games, can lead to rumination and eventually withdrawal from playing video games (Fox and Tang, 2014; Fox and Tang, 2016). Unsurprisingly, females have voiced their awareness of sexism in the community (as well as industry) and

expressed their desire for a more balanced portrayal the sexes within video games (Schott and Horrell, 2000). However, video games continue to depict women in a stereotypical manner (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Jansz & Martis, 2007). Females are oversexualised in video games and games companies are producing games with little to no inclusion of minority females (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess and Brown, 2011). Research has shown that gender role stereotyping, especially the stereotypical portrayal of female characters leads to low female motivation to play video games (Lucas and Sherry, 2004; Ivory, 2006).

Sexism in the Gaming Community

Most research on gaming experiences of females has reported that females are subject to sexual harassment whilst playing video games (Gray, 2012; O'Leary, 2012; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2012; Taylor, 2006) which causes significant emotional distress, depression (Larsen and Fitzgerald, 2010; Willness et al., 2007) and feelings of selfblame (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco and Lyubomirsky, 2008). Unsurprisingly, females in these situations tend to withdraw themselves from the hostile environment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997), costing them an advancement in their career (Gutek and Koss, 1993). Demonstrating the above point, a recent study found that lower-skilled male players were more hostile towards teammates with a female voice. However, this did not occur when males were a higher skill level (Kasumovic and Kuznekoff, 2015). Salter and Blodgett (2012) argue that evidence such as this promotes a masculine community that discourages females from playing.

Although it is well established in research that females experience the virtual gaming world as second-class citizens (Schott and Horrell, 2000), experiences of females outside of the game should also be considered. Knowledge in this area can help

further understanding of the experiences of females that are visible in the gaming community and help recognise why males are much more successful than females in the semiprofessional and professional gaming scenes. More research is needed to encapsulate the effect that social factors have on female gamers concerning progression in the gaming community. This research aims to fill a gap in the current research by focusing on the virtual and real world experiences of female gamers using League of Legends, the most played video game in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012).

Research Aims

This qualitative research aims to explore the video game experiences of females concerning motivations for playing and progression into a visible position in the gaming community. The main objectives are as follows:

1. To gain insight into the subjective experiences of females in the online gaming community as the female gamer group increases (Griffiths and McLean, 2013).
2. To explore the effect that social factors have on the motivations and experiences of female gameplay.
3. To provide recommendations to improve female gaming experience with focus on supporting females towards higher levels.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative design was used in this research, as the subjective experience of females in the gaming world was the essence of the study. It benefited from using qualitative research as meaning was formed from participant experiences, in the participants' own words (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Using this design allows for an 'insider' perspective on different social worlds (Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson, 2009) which gives access to a world that may be restricted using other research methods.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect data about the female experience within the professional and non-professional e-sports gaming scene. The method was chosen as it was important that the participants felt as comfortable as possible during the research and semi-structured interviews are 'a culturally familiar form of interaction for most people' (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Using semi structured interviews ensured that information and experiences that participants shared during the interview was exhaustive and rich (Baumann & Bason, 2011:405) proving to be a beneficial method in this research. The casual nature of semistructured interviews promoted the rise of new topics and spontaneous points in discussion (Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004) and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the interview, which created a more conversational tone. In addition, the interviewee's were encouraged to navigate the conversation so that sensitive issues were discussed voluntarily, and without probing from the researcher (Silverman, 2011). This was important in aiding the research to be as ethical as possible.

Participants

Qualitative research benefits from gathering large amounts of information from fewer participants (Willig, 2008) and so the sample consisted of five participants, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, who currently played League of Legends. Three of the participants were recruited through a purposive method and were friends and acquaintances of the researcher. The other two participants were members of the Manchester Metropolitan University Gaming Society and responded to a post made by the researcher on the Gaming Society Facebook page. The data gathered was enough to answer the research question sufficiently (Francis et al., 2010) but did not create an unrealistic workload.

Data Collection Methods

A flexible interview schedule (Appendix 6) was prepared prior to the interviews to ensure that while promoting the disclosure of extra information, the questions were directed to answer the research question. The interview schedule (Appendix 6) was created based on themes that emerged in research conducted by McLean and Griffiths (2013). The overarching themes were identity, social aspects to playing and motivations to playing; sub-themes included 'Girl Gamer' label, playing with significant others and enjoyment of gaming. The interview schedule used in this research included the above sub-themes as topics as the researcher felt these were relevant to the research aims of this study. In addition, various topics that were covered in the interview are heavily researched topics that have had a significant effect on research in the area of female gamers. For example, research has shown that sexualisation of female characters has a negative effect on female gameplay (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Dill & Thill, 2007; Ivory, 2006) and so it was important for the research

that this issue be addressed in the interview. However, it must be noted that although sexualisation of in-game characters is present in the interview, the researcher did not introduce ideas or ask closed questions to the participants regarding the topic. Specifically in the case of sexualisation of in-game characters, participants were asked how they felt about the characters, not how they felt about the sexualisation of the characters. The list of questions over email (appendix 7) was not used.

To avoid participants struggling during the interview, the schedule contained open questions and prompts. The interviews ended naturally, on the terms of the participant to ensure that their experiences playing video games had been discussed as freely as they wished.

A pilot interview was carried out to enhance the researcher's interview skills; Riley, Sullivan & Gibson (2012) advise conducting a pilot interview because 'conducting the interviews is always harder than novice researchers anticipate'. Interviews took place in a time and location convenient to, and chosen by, the participants. Emphasis was placed on the comfort of the participants and an environment was established where the participants felt safe enough to talk freely about their experiences and feelings (Kvale, 1996). All of the interviews took place in a local coffee shop, except for one, which was conducted over video call. Conversation from the semi-structured interviews was recorded using an audio recorder, not a mobile phone and transcribed afterwards using verbatim transcription. Verbatim transcription is the 'word-for-word reproduction of verbal data' (Poland, 1995) and so the transcript written is an exact copy of the spoken interview.

Data Analysis

Transcription of the data was carried out from the audio recording, not from any notes made to avoid data loss (Willig, 2008), and provided the researcher with a platform to familiarise themselves with the data. After transcription of the interviews was complete, the data collected was analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a foundational approach for qualitative psychology and that many other analysis approaches can be built from it. Thematic analysis is a unique tool and method for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and is very useful for organising and analysing qualitative data. Using thematic analysis meant that a meaningful understanding of the research topic, in this case female experiences in the gaming community, was reached, furthering the knowledge pool in this area of psychology (Boyatzis, 1998).

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a systematic method to carrying out a thematic analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data –transcribing the data, reading and rereading the transcript and initial noting down of ideas
2. Generating initial codes – first codes are produced from the data, indicating what appears interesting to the researcher.
3. Searching for themes – codes are sorted into broader over-arching themes.
4. Reviewing themes – refining the themes, a thematic 'map' is created to assess validity.
5. Defining and naming themes – Current themes are 'defined and refined'
6. Producing the report – final analysis and writing up of the report

Ethical Considerations and Risk Assessment

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines set out by the BPS (2009) and MMU Ethics Procedure & Code of Conduct. An application for Ethics Approval Form (AEAF) was approved (appendix 1). No participants were contacted before the AEAF form was approved. Participants read an information sheet (appendix 3) before their interview commenced, which outlined the full aims of the study, as well as informing the participants fully about the interview process and purpose. Full contact details for the researcher and the research supervisor were made available to the participants and all participants signed a consent form (appendix 4). All participants were informed that they could stop the interviews at any time and that they could withdraw their data from the research if they wished. Any emotional distress the participants endured during the interviews did not surpass harm in which they face in their normal lifestyles, as the recollection included events from their normal life. The nature of the research promoted this discussion and a full debrief (appendix 5), including contact details for the Samaritans Counselling Service, was provided. A significant effort was made to reduce harm and distress to all participants, including conducting the interviews in a place that was chosen by, and felt comfortable to the participants.

Names and personal details of the participants, as well as any names mentioned in the interviews, were protected when transcribing the interviews. Names were pseudonymised to protect the identity of the participants and ensure participant anonymity. Interview recordings were recorded on a recording device, not a mobile phone. Recordings were deleted once transcribed and the transcript files were

transferred to a password protected file. Interview data was discussed with a research supervisor and so was not confidential, but participants were made aware of this before the research took place.

Analysis & Discussion

Perceived weakness

A recurrent theme in the transcripts was the theme of perceived weakness: a stereotypical judgement felt by the participants that female players, regardless of evidence or standard of play demonstrated, are inferior to male players. Research has found that it is common for females to experience sexist comments implying inferiority regarding sex or gender from males (Ballard & Welch, 2015; Yee, 2014) and participants reported finding this difficult, especially when they felt they were not performing to a good standard in game:

'I think the thing is, is that if you're not really good as a female then you're kind of living up to this stereotype that females aren't good at playing games.'

(Louise, 81-82)

'...when I play bad and because my name suggests that I'm a girl, people have said, 'oh, it's a girl playing, that explains it' kind of thing. It sucks because it makes it hard to get better when people just expect you to be bad.

People say things like, 'you're playing like a girl' as if girls are always bad.'

(Frances, 52-54)

Both Louise and Frances express despondency towards progression to become better players as the game does not provide an environment where there is confidence placed in their playing abilities. As a female, they felt as though other players are

already judging them as a bad player ('people just expect you to be bad') and that they are just 'typical female players' if they do not play to a high standard ('living up to the female stereotype'). To avoid these negative expectations of themselves from others, research has found that females tend to conceal their gender as much as possible to avoid sexist stereotypes and comments whilst gaming (Fox & Tang, 2013; Griffiths & Hussain, 2008; McLean & Griffiths, 2013). Investigating the use of personal avatars or voice chat functions has revealed that females can avoid sexism from others in the game by hiding their identity (Huh & Williams, 2010; Yee, 2006). In this research, participants mentioned taking measures to hide their identity such as minimal typing in the in game chat box, but generally, League of Legends does not allow much opportunity for the identity of females to be exposed. However, despite the lack of gender identifiers, all participants mentioned that they still felt sexist attitudes indirectly whilst playing the game. When asked if they had experienced sexism whilst playing League of Legends:

'Um... I don't think so because it's a lot harder to tell that you are a female [in League of Legends] compared to other games. You don't have a personal avatar and a lot of males play female champions too... I think I still try and not let other players know that I'm a girl though, I don't talk in the chat in-game... I feel that other players would say mean things to me if they knew' (Sarah, 6268)

'No-one has said anything to me but I think as a female gamer that before I've already started playing I'm being judged as worse by other players. I haven't experienced direct sexism but I do feel an underlying sexism and people expecting me to be a rubbish player' (Christie,

These findings are interesting as previous research has focused on the ability to reduce sexism in game by hiding identity (McLean and Griffiths, 2013) but participants here talk about 'an underlying sexism' and an assumption that they will experience harassment from others even though they haven't directly encountered it themselves. This may stem from females participating in a hostile environment where sexist language and actions, such as frequently using the word 'rape' in a pleasurable manner (Salter and Blodgett, 2012), are passively witnessed and reinforce masculine values (Fox and Tang, 2014). Participants showed evidence of internalisation of the stereotypical representations of gamers that are portrayed in the media, which negatively affects their desire to play video games and become part of the gaming community. Research has shown that harassment inside and outside of the game can lead to rumination and ultimately, women's withdrawal from online games (Fox and Tang, 2016).

Overemphasis on gender

This theme highlighted that all participants felt that they were regarded as female, before they were appreciated as a player. The distinction between 'gamers' and 'girl gamers' is relevant here and plays an important role in the integration of females into the gaming world by reinforcing the divide between male and female gamers (McLean and Griffiths, 2013) making it harder for females to be viewed as equals. Participants felt as though the 'female gamer' label had a negative impact on their experience playing video games, especially in the professional scene.

'Professional teams would not look at a female player and see someone who is as good as someone on their team. They'll see a good female gamer, not a good gamer.' (Elizabeth, 86-87)

'[Being a female would prevent me from playing professionally] because you would have to be insanely good just to get considered. You would have to at the point where there is no male better than you to be seen as a 'gamer' and not a 'female gamer'... it just doesn't happen.' (Frances, 85-86)

Participants stressed the impossibility of being treated as an equal when discussing playing League of Legends, especially professionally where skill level is overlooked by gender. The 'female gamer' label seemed to infer enough weakness that an excessive amount of skill is required by a female in order to be noticed in the professional scene ('you would have to be insanely good just to be considered'). These findings complement previous research conducted on females and general career progression and when compared to career advancement generally, females lag behind in terms of salary progression and in frequency of job transfers (Stroh, Brett and Reilly, 1992) despite the fact that there are no sex differences in performance (Joshi, Son and Roh, 2014). This is true in professional e-sports; women are rendered invisible and when present at professional e-sporting events (such as NerdCorps) are fulfilling supportive, subordinate roles (Taylor, Jenson and de Castell, 2009). Participants felt that an overemphasis on gender continued throughout the gaming scene, especially when they attempted to integrate themselves into the visible gaming community where the female identity was not concealable. This allowed for social barriers that are present in sports and other male dominated professions (Whiteside & Hardin, 2012) to prevent participants progressing to the same level as males. There is a clear distinction between women and male categories and participants felt that the

female category is considered lesser, regardless of talent, and they have to work harder to be noticed next to a male.

'I feel like it's a profession similar to DJing; you have to be better (and usually attractive) than most males to even be considered at the same level... and you have to be outstanding to be noticed, like I said before you're starting from underneath. You have an extra bit to go because you're a female – you always have something to prove above a male.' (Elizabeth, 101-105)

'No, I think that there would be barriers. I think that as a female trying to become professional, you can progress and be as good as other people at the same level but the community and other players are aware that you're female and you would be judged more harshly and you would have to work a lot harder to prove yourself.' (Christie, 73-76)

Both interviewees feel that they need to prove themselves by demonstrating a high skill level to other players, most likely in an attempt to dismiss any stereotypical preconceptions that may be in place (McLean and Griffiths, 2013). However, it has been established by Ratan et al. (2015) that there is no difference in the rate that females and males accrue skill level when playing League of Legends; any perceived difference in skill level is most likely untrue and due to misplaced ideologies. This supports previous research that females face barriers when trying to break through the 'glass ceiling' (Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt, 2009) and that these barriers lead to an absence of women in high-ranking roles in organisations (Oakley, 2000).

Feeling unwelcome in the gaming community

a. Over-sexualisation of females

Previous research has mainly focused on the motivations, play styles and interactions of females within the virtual world that the game is contained (Jenson and De Castell, 2010; Royse et al., 2007; Salter and Blodgett, 2012) and has found multiple aspects of the game that females interact with, one of which is the characters. Generally, video games do not have leading female characters (Jansz & Martis, 2007) but when they do, research has shown that they are under-represented and more sexualised than their male equivalents (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Ivory, 2006). The oversexualisation of female characters confirms that the true audience of the game is males and causes females to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in the gaming scene. When asked about the characters, participants only mentioned over-sexualisation of them, disregarding all other attributes.

'I don't think that I like [over-sexualisation of female champions] at all, you meet people that don't like playing for that reason and it does put people off playing LoL and that's not fair because it is a really good game. Just because this stupid art is showing half naked females it means that girls are missing out. My friend Helen doesn't play because of that.' (Frances, 44-47)

'... it's always the females with 2 inches of clothing and bare flesh... they need protecting in the game and then having no clothes is actually their sex appeal being put before their safety.' (Christie, 30-35)

'But sometimes it probably does make me feel quite bad about myself because they obviously are really sexy and males do ogle over them but they're not real so I'm not sure.' (Louise, 43-45)

All interviewees mentioned the over-sexualisation of female characters and agreed that it has a negative effect on female gameplay ranging from avoidance of the game ('My friend doesn't play because of that') to mild self-loathing ('it probably does make me feel quite bad about myself'). These findings support previous research that female self-efficacy is negatively affected by over-sexualised female characters (BehmMorawitz and Mastro, 2009). In addition, there has been moderate research suggesting that the exaggerated sex appeal of females in games has a knock on effect on the self-esteem of the player (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007). Although a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the over-sexualisation of characters in the game, much less has been carried out on the over-sexualisation of visible female players in the gaming community. In this research, participants insinuate that over-sexualisation applies to female players as well characters.

'...and even when you have proved it, you always have the over-sexualisation of your appearance and constant criticism of your performance. I think it feels like nobody really has your back....I don't think that it would be worth it when you feel nobody really is rooting for you as a woman. Everyone is waiting for you to fail' (Louise, 134-136)

'There are girls who play League on Twitch and nobody cares about whether they can play, all boys care about is their boobs' (Sarah, 136)

Participants agree that skill level is a redundant commodity when females are playing within the visible community, with more emphasis based on their appearance ('all boys care about is their boobs'). Louise mentions that despite proving a high skill level, support from the community is lacking ('everyone is waiting for you to fail'); research has found that women with successful careers are associated with a high risk of failure

(Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009). Sexual harassment research that has been carried out using streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv found that women were much more affected than males by sexism (Alklid, 2015) and when looking at League of Legends players on Twitch.tv, it was found that females attracted viewers based on sex appeal rather than game status (Lee, 2015). Additionally, women in sports are often sexually objectified, have their success diminished and are usually promoted in more feminine sports (Weber & Carini, 2012).

a. Lack of encouragement from the community

A problem highlighted in the interviews is one of exclusion from the gaming community where females who play video games “are constantly reminded of the intended male subject position they are trespassing upon” (Yee, 2006: 93).

‘It’s a boys world, it really is. There’s no drive for females like there are in other things like science, it kind of feels like we’re turning up to the party uninvited. There’s just no room or requirement or need for females in League, especially professionally.’ (Elizabeth, 119-120)

‘...you’re not encouraged as a female to be good at the game, I don’t know, it’s just always been so male dominated.’ (Frances, 92-93)

Although some dialogue has taken place in an attempt to involve females in video games (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998), participants feel as though they are unwelcome in the gaming scene and unsupported and unencouraged by other players or game companies (‘you’re not encouraged as a female to be good at the game’). Cheryan et al. (2009, 2011) found that in situations where masculine stereotypes were upheld, women’s sense of belonging and interest of a subject is diminished. This contributes

to the further understanding of the under-representation of females in gaming at a novice and professional level. Gaming can be compared to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths-based (STEM) fields, which at one time were almost entirely composed of males, and research has shown that prolonged exposure to video games has been linked to an interest in STEM subjects (DiSalvo, 2012; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). Implementing STEM talent initiatives to females has been successful in high school and middle school students (Brody, 2006) and a similar programme could be useful in encouraging females to progress to their full potential in an environment that promotes equality (Salter and Blodgett, 2012).

Limitations of Research

When this research was proposed, the researcher intended to interview a mixture of novice female players and semi-professional female players. However, the responsiveness of semi-professional was overestimated and so the participants consisted of five novice female players; the authentic experience of professional gamers was not captured in the research. Future research would benefit from the investigation of the social experiences of semi-professional and professional players. Other limitations may be related to the fact that the qualitative data gathered was subjective and specific to the participants and so cannot be generalised.

Recommendations

This research has highlighted key areas in the gaming community where females are subject to feelings of inadequacy, unwelcomeness and discomfort. Recommendations have been made as guidelines on how to progress in the future to improve the experiences of female gamers. Social gaming environments are not currently policed and harassment policies either do not exist or are not well informed (O'Leary, 2012);

League of Legends uses a community driven tribunal system that is complex and uses human judgement (Kou & Nardi, 2013). It would be beneficial for those who harass other players, including females; to be suitably punished for their actions as strict guidelines may be effective in reducing sexism online and consequently, make the gaming experience much more pleasant for females (Fox and Tang, 2014). By not catering for females, games companies are now alienating half of their player base (Casti, 2014) which undoubtedly will be costly for the organisation (Gutek and Koss, 1993). It is recommended that games companies begin to take responsibility for the content of their games so that females feel as though they can play without discomfort and without barriers to progression. Implementing an initiative similar to STEM initiatives mentioned in this research is suggested for the recruitment of more females into the gaming community and for the reassurance of belonging to those who are already associated with the community. Recommendations for further research include exploring the experiences of female semi-professional and professional gamers.

Reflexive Analysis

I am a 23-year-old female currently in my final undergraduate year studying psychology with an avid interest in the experiences of female gamers. As a gamer myself, I have experienced sexism and harassment while playing League of Legends which had a negative impact on my desire to play professionally. I found that there is a limited amount of research on the experiences of semi-professional and professional female gamers and wanted to explore the emergence of females into the visible community. I thought that interviewing other females could help explain the noticeable lack of females in the visible gaming community.

I hoped to have interviewed female players that were more involved in the visible gaming community and sent interview questions via email (appendix 7) to six individuals that streamed regularly on Twitch.tv. However, I overestimated their response rate and none of them replied with answers to my questions. If I were to do further research, I would make sure that more effort was spent in recruiting females that have more experience of the visible community as I feel their knowledge would be insightful and very useful for research.

Not having the female streamers from Twitch meant that I had to make changes to my original research proposal; I had to recruit more participants and change the aims of my research away from the professional angle. I was grateful that two females from the MMU Gaming Society participated in the research to take the place of the missing participants. I was slightly upset that I had to change the aims of my research as I felt that my research would be very similar to McLean and Griffiths (2013) thematic analysis into the experiences of female gamers. However, I found that as the interviews progressed, the original aim of the study was regained because participants had experienced the social barriers that were present outside the game.

My findings enlightened me to the severity of everyday sexism in the gaming community, which in some cases, was quite difficult to hear. As a woman, I have experienced sexism and sometimes it is challenging to talk about; I especially found it difficult to hear the negative experiences of the participants that I knew personally. However, I was pleased with the honesty of the participants and, as they were told that I played League of Legends too, I feel as though we bonded over similar experiences. I believe the findings were interesting to both the participants and me and the experience was highly positive for everyone involved.

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